

**RADICAL ISLAMISM: CAUSES AND PROBLEMS**  
**A FRAMEWORK**  
**USAID workshop**  
**15 July 2002**

Islamism is both:

- a religiously-driven phenomenon dealing with key religious issues such as search for values and social/moral structure in a contemporary world—part of a global phenomenon; and
- the vehicle for many grievances that can be expressed through Islamic vocabulary and cultural references

Main causes stimulating the growth of Islamist movements:

A. Structural Problems and Grievances--Endogenous

- Bad Governance: authoritarianism, oppression (leading to lack of alternate channels for the expression of grievances), corruption, absence of rule of law, inadequate social services, and especially deteriorating or narrow education (which feeds negative socio-economic conditions);
- Negative socio-economic conditions: poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunity or chance to advance, social/ethnic/religious fault-lines, identity issues, feelings of frustration and impotence—not amenable to quick change
- Use of Islam by the state to advance its own legitimacy
- Failure of alternate visions (Marxism, socialism, Arabism, democracy, etc.); lack of rivals

B. Exogenous issues

- U.S. policy, changeable only by Washington, although foreign developments and actions affect policy
  - Palestine, Iraq, WOT—leading grievances
  - Presence of US military bases
  - Regime dependence on U.S., lack of consistent US support for democracy and human rights
- Oppression of Muslim minorities by foreign non-Muslim states (India, Philippines, Israel, Balkans)
- Anxieties about globalization and cultural encroachment; changing societal values and standards; globalization seen as identical to Westernization with the U.S. as leader; fear that globalization means West will continue to advance and Islamic world continue to decline; humiliation at impotence and loss of power

Islamism offers a cultural and ideological framework for the analysis of societal problems and for fabricating solutions:

- Islam offers identity on a wider level, more gratifying than mere nationalism, identification with the larger community of other Muslims and their shared problems
- Islamism offers a mandate for political action and a compelling moral critique of the state, its autocracy, corruption, oppression, illegitimacy by democratic standards
- Islam seeks to restore national, social and cultural power
- Islamism conducts an anti-imperialist agenda

- Islamism offers a compelling moral vision of how the community should be constructed; Islam provides meaning to life

Potential problems caused by radical or narrow Islamist thinking:

- anti-Westernism, anti-Americanism
- Intolerance of other religions or alternative ways of thinking, narrow social inclusivity
- Breakdown state-society barriers, increasing penetration of society due to desire to control more and more aspects of public and private behavior
- Radical political thinking
- Reluctance for political compromise
- Use of violence, terrorism, incitement to hostile acts
- Authoritarian views of governance, rejection of democracy by Islamic radicals; in more extreme forms, may be totalitarian because there is only one right way to behave/believe
- Islamist threat used by autocratic and bankrupt regimes to maintain power and repress opposition of any kind